



# The importance of equity-minded leadership during dual pandemics

The start of this academic year has been like no other in the history of higher education, as students and educational leaders are faced with navigating a global health crisis and widespread protests against racial injustice.

The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism remind us that systems and policies can have a disproportionately negative impact on low-income populations and people of color. If college leaders are committed to not losing ground in enrollment and graduation for students of color and low-income backgrounds, there are important steps they can take to advance equity.

Recent conversations with three university presidents offer actionable insights. Havidán Rodríguez from the University at Albany, Alexander Cartwright from the University of Central Florida (UCF), and Patrick Valdez from the University of New Mexico-Taos (UNM-Taos) took similar approaches to navigating the current crises while maintaining a focus on equity in their decision making. These leaders employed three strategies to make decisions through an equity lens: seek feedback from students, maximize resources, and monitor data.

## **Strategy: Seek feedback from students**

It sounds simple: seek input from those directly impacted by your decisions. Yet, how and whether institutional leaders choose to engage students prior to making a decision—and not just afterward to support decisions they've made—is critical to advancing equity. At Albany, Rodríguez deployed staff to call students to ask how they were doing and what they needed to be successful. At UNM-Taos, Valdez used a student survey and had staff call students to increase contact and get feedback. At UCF, Cartwright used digital surveys and student learning platforms to connect with students.

While each of these leaders used a different method to collect student input, ultimately that input drove their decisions.

## **Strategy: Maximize resources**

How leaders use the resources they have, however limited, is critical. In spring 2020, these leaders used what they had at their disposal: Albany repackaged computers in its computer lab and library, and shipped them to students who did not have access to technology for virtual classes. At UCF, Cartwright used digital tools to create a sense of belonging for students, following the example of the gaming sector, which has built virtual communities all over the world.

At UNM-Taos, Valdez redeployed his administrative staff to call students—an approach that both kept staff employed during a very difficult time and helped develop their own institutional version of intrusive advising. Staff strengthened students' connections and helped them access institutional resources.

Taking stock of the resources at your disposal and deploying them to serve students can make the difference between students staying enrolled or dropping out. These leaders thought creatively about how to overcome challenges and maximize resources to support student success.



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The Education Trust

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### Strategy: Monitor data

At Ed Trust, we stress that leaders at every level need to continuously monitor data. Today, using data to improve student success and target resources and services to those who may be disproportionately impacted is imperative. At Albany, Rodríguez and his team monitored data on students who had not logged on to virtual classes. At UNM-Taos, Valdez monitored registration data and assigned administrative staff lists of students to call and connect with campus resources, and to inquire about their fall enrollment plans. The strategy increased returning students, full-time students, and Native American students for fall 2020.

The use of data to ensure that campuses aren't taking steps backward in serving low-income students and students of color is vital to advancing equity and closing opportunity gaps.

The decisions higher education leaders make today can be the difference between achievement or disappointment for students who have been disadvantaged by systemic barriers and inequality. As we have learned in our work at Ed Trust, there is no secret sauce to student success. It is clear, however, that grounding decisions in student voices, deploying existing resources to serve students, and monitoring institutional data are critical to closing institutional equity gaps.

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### Read more:

See the TIAA Institute website for its June 2019 [Social Mobility, Race, and Higher Education](#) convening, hosted in partnership with the Education Trust. Resources available include, among others:

The Education Trust (2019). [State Equity Report Card Overview](#). The Education Trust: Washington, D.C.

American Council on Education (2019). [The Status of Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education](#). American Council on Education: Washington, D.C.

Opportunity Insights (2019). [Restoring the American Dream: Using Big Data to Improve Social Mobility](#). Opportunity Insights: Cambridge, MA.

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